

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A15THE BALTIMORE SUN
14 January 1982

The Clark Appointment

Nine Months of On-the-Job Training Is Not Enough

Washington.

IN THEORY, the president's National Security Council and staff were designed to perform three critical jobs:

- Coordinating the foreign and defense policy decision process;
- Managing crises; and
- Developing over-all national strategy to anticipate threats and take advantage of opportunities.

In practice, the NSC system has almost

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never worked this way. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower used the system primarily for planning, and left coordination and crisis management to the secretary of State. President Kennedy used the NSC staff to police decisions once they were made, while President Johnson considered it "not a live institution" (although he relied heavily on the personal advice of Walt Rostow, who was his assistant for national security affairs).

The Nixon-Kissinger and Carter NSC systems probably were closest to the model that the drafters of the National Security Act of 1947 had in mind. And the experience of those years demonstrated the influence over foreign policy that could accrue to the national security adviser if the NSC system carried out all three functions mentioned above. "Next to the President himself," one high level White House staffer in the Carter years observed, "the assistant for national security has the largest role in determining what this country does in foreign affairs."

President Reagan has just appointed Deputy Secretary of State William P. Clark to this powerful job. For nine months, Judge Clark has served as the alter-ego of Secretary of State Alexander Haig. Now he has been thrust into a position that could make him Mr. Haig's competitor, if not the nearly final arbiter of foreign policy between the State and Defense Departments.

The sigh of relief from the Washington foreign policy community at the appointment of Judge Clark was audible. Throughout the policy debate on arms control talks with the Soviets, theatre nuclear force modernization, MX basing and responses to the Polish crisis of the past several months, the NSC has operated under the clouds of both suspected misconduct on the part of its head, Richard Allen, and a more general charge of ineffectiveness in its briefings of the president and dealings with State and Defense. "Judge Clark looks good," one colleague said, "because Allen looked so bad."

Judge Clark brings some important credentials and skills to the job. He is clearly a member of the California mafia, and served as the first chief of staff to then-Governor Reagan in Sacramento. He invented the now famous "mini-memo" (i.e. one page) form for summarizing issues requiring Mr. Reagan's decision. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger has called him a "superb manager." The professionals who worked with Judge Clark at the State Department learned they could rely on his ability to grasp foreign policy issues.

But there are also some disturbing features to the appointment which are likely to show up only in a crisis.

Before voting against confirming Judge Clark as deputy secretary of State, Senator Joseph Biden told his colleagues (three of whom voted against confirmation and three of whom voted "present"): "I don't believe Justice Clark will go into the job with even a general perception of what he believes to be the major issues confronting the United States in terms of foreign policy or with some degree of specificity about what our relationships with our allies should be, what the situation in Eastern Europe is, what is happening in China." Nine months of on-the-job training later, these questions should be put to Judge Clark.

Before coming to Washington, Judge Clark had neither any formal training in foreign policy nor any experience in foreign affairs. Now he is in a position that requires not only outstanding administrative skills, but also depth in understanding the nature of the foreign policy challenges facing the United States across a broad set of issues stem-